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VERGIL'S DESCRIPTION OF HADES

The inconsistencies of the philosophical ideas expressed in the sixth book of the *Æneid* have often been noted and cannot be explained away on any rational principle. Some of the inconsistencies are glaring. For example, we have an account of a judgment in the neutral zone of Hades, but apparently there is no disposition of the guilty and innocent after a decision has been rendered. We have a complete development of the transmigration of souls, and yet there are a Tartarus and an Elysium, fixed abodes for the souls, as if there were to be no transmigration. We are left without explanation as to what the purified souls, who are to be the living persons of Roman history, are to do in the meantime. Anchises has not submitted to purgation (he might be regarded as an important exception) and apparently is not to return to the body, and for this circumstance no explanation is offered.

But whatever may be the inconsistencies of the philosophical aspects of the Inferno, there is a consistency in the description of this book which has been too little noticed. The philosophy may be all awry but the impression upon the imaginative thought created by the description of the underworld is unified. Vergil's description of places visible to the eye is well known for its skill and artistic value. The harbor which receives the storm-tossed Trojans furnishes an excellent example. Single epithets and brief phrases here and there catch the essential quality of some place or scene, and represent a well-defined picture to the mind. But to the waters of the irremeable shores the poet had gone only in fancy. Well might he call the Muses to guide him as he revealed to mortal eye things hidden in the depths of earth and shrouded in mist. There were literary sources upon which he might have drawn and from which he did no doubt draw suggestions. Chief of these was the Nekuia of the *Odyssey*, but there was a great difference between the two descriptions. Homer's method of description is objective. The thing described exists for itself and by a later process its qualities impress the soul of the poet. His description of Hades is given

indirectly and only in the vaguest terms. His Nekuia consists very largely of conversations with the dead. It is evident that his chief interest lay in these objective interviews rather than in the description of the realms invisible. His inability to conceive a situation subjectively is no doubt largely responsible for this method. Vergil's description of Hades is subjective on the whole. It had its origin in the mood of the poet. He had brooded long over the lot of the departed souls, and his description of the lower world is essentially the product of his contemplative mood touched with tender sentiment and a feeling for the beautiful. Vergil did not completely reject what his predecessors had said about the unseen regions. He professes to be telling what he has heard, but this profession was only a fiction and it is his own interpretation which he has given us in his Inferno. The exactness of detail as compared with the vagueness of Homer and others is itself a mark of Vergil's originality. He has succeeded in making an impressive picture where the elements involved were of the vaguest sort. The poet himself must have realized that, as compared with the world which he knew and enjoyed, the world below was shadowy. But as compared with what others had written, it acquired when touched with Vergil's pen a form almost realistic, and to this end the poet's earnestness and tenderness contributed the largest part.

It may be stated in passing that the present discussion has little or nothing to do with the geography of the Inferno. The geography is somewhat involved with the philosophical ideas and shares in their inconsistencies and has little or nothing to do with the general impression of the description of Hades.

The predominating characteristic of Vergil's Inferno is darkness. In common with others he has invested the habitation of the dead with the condition which develops as the light withdraws and darkness decends upon the eyes. But Vergil loses no opportunity to impress this quality upon his picture. It creates the atmosphere of Hades. Some have criticized as inconsistent the offering of dark victims, since moral law is supposed to prevail in the realms below. So far as the color of the victim is concerned, it probably meant nothing more to the poet than the anticipation of the darkness of Hades. For the same reason, the

entrance to Hades may be reached only through intervening forests, and Cocytus with its dark waves encircles it. The entrance itself is sheltered by a dark pool and the shadows of the woods. The anticipation of darkness is fully realized when Æneas and the Sibyl have actually entered the home of Pluto, for they went on their way unseen through the darkness under the lonely night—

"Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram,"—

and there is no more light than when one journeys in the forest by the scanty light of the fitful moon when Jupiter has concealed the sky in shadow and dark night has taken away the hue of objects:—

"quale per incertam lunam sub luce maligna
est iter in silvis, ubi caelum condidit umbra
Iuppiter et rebus nox abstulit atra colorem."

Every single object partakes of the general darkness. The hydra has dark, cavernous mouths, Charon's boat is dusky, the dwellings are unvisited by the sun, not only the elm-tree and the grove have their shadows, but the ways are dark and even the spacious fields of Elysium, in spite of their general brightness, are regions of mist. It is as Charon says, the place of shades, of sleep and drowsy night—

"umbrarum hic locus est, somni noctisque soporae,"—

and not even Elysium escapes entirely the prevailing gloom. Dark night with its mournful shadow encircles the brow of one of the unborn spirits of the Elysian fields. In the neutral zone no relief against the universal darkness is found unless we except the case of Dido whom Æneas recognizes dimly in the shadows as one who, when the month is new, sees the moon arise or thinks he has seen it through the clouds:—

". . . . qualem primo qui surgere mense
aut videt aut vidisse putat per nubila lunam."

Only one possible gleam of light enhancing the gloom of Inferno, the light of love penetrating the realms of death.

Another quality dominating the poet's description of the lower world is magnitude of size. Everything is made on a large scale. Perhaps this is a concomitant of darkness which apparently in-

creases the size of objects. More likely, however, the poet's fancy has created regions so spacious in order that they may correspond with the countless generations of the departed. The inhabitants of the neutral zone are as many as the leaves which gliding fall with the first chill of autumn, or as the birds which gather landward from the deep when winter drives them across the sea and sends them to sunny lands:—

> "quam multa in silvis autumni frigore primo
> lapsa cadunt folia, aut ad terram gurgite ab alto
> quam multae glomerantur aves, ubi frigidus annus
> trans pontum fugat et terris immittit apricis."

And so the unnumbered spirits awaiting purgation in Elysium are as many as the bees which on a bright summer day settle upon the flowers of varied colors and cluster around the white lilies.

It is a huge, yawning chasm through which Æneas enters into Hades. Tartarus extends with sheer fall twice so far downward as is the skyward view toward ætherial Olympus. The elm-tree is mighty, Dido wanders in a large forest, the gate, the hydra, the vulture, the rock which the inhabitants of Tartarus roll, the dog Cerberus, are all on a large and impressive scale.

The silence of the dead finds a place in the description of Hades. These are the regions that stretch in silence into the distance. The perpetual night is lonely. The grove is still. Even the council called to give advice consists of silent spirits. The general silence is broken by occasional sounds, but these are necessary to increase the awfulness of the situation. Especially is this true of the wailing of the infants found at the entrance of Hades, and of the clanking of chains and the blows resounding from Tartarus. Conversation may pass between the inhabitants of Hades and its visitors but this is merely to further the progress of the story, and the poet's conception of the normal situation is probably expressed by the feeble cry which cheats the yawning mouths of the spirits of the Greeks.

Vergil had some idea of the unsubstantial character of the soul, so that these realms are empty and the homes of Pluto are vacant. Perhaps the poet wished also to convey the thought that Hades

is spacious enough to contain all coming generations of men. The quality would be somewhat involved with the idea of magnitude and silence which also characterize the underworld. It is a fitting abode for the unsubstantial dreams. The terrible shapes of mythology are represented here under the hollow images of form against which mortal sword may do no execution. The simile of the withered leaves for the unnumbered ghosts obtains a part of its appropriatness from the same idea. Even in Elysium we find this characteristic persisting, for as Æneas attempts to embrace his father, the image escapes his hands like the fickle breeze and a fleeting dream. These regions are heavy with mystery, but the poet has made the unreality of Hades most real. It is a misty realm of unsubstantial ghosts which contrast strangely with the mortal body of the mighty Æneas.

The hideous ugliness of death, however, impresses upon Vergil's description of Hades its most outstanding characteristic. Whatever hopefulness Vergil may have had of the life after death, its immediate ugliness could not escape him. In many ways he has sought expression for this feeling of repugnance. The entrance of Hades is forbidding with its yawning chasm of jagged rocks and gloomy waters and woods. Foul exhalations issue from its dark jaws. At the vestibule of Hades itself sit ominously the terrible forms of all hateful conditions associated with the suffering and death of man. Here we find couching Grief and Cares. Pale Diseases make this place their home, and gloomy Old Age and Fear and Hunger and Want and Death and Toil dwell here. Sleep enters into this category on a different basis, but unholy Pleasures, on the ground that they lead so often to death, are aptly placed. So also death-dealing War and the Furies and wild Discord with viper locks bound in bloody fillets. The monstrous forms of Greek mythology add to the ugliness. Acheron seethes with muddy waters and belches its sand into Cocytus. Charon, the grim ferryman, is hideously ugly with his filth, his unkempt beard, his fixed eyes of fire, and his vile garments. Suggestions dropped here and there develop the impression of the horrible. Unseemly mud and gray sedge greet the visitors when they have crossed the river. The shores are dread, the waters gloomy and loveless, and all places wild

with neglect, and stormy. In the description of Tartarus and of the exquisite tortures of the damned, Vergil exhausts the imagination. A river of fire, Tisiphone clad in bloody mantle and with scourge of serpents, groans and blows, clanking of chains, the creaking doors, the hydra with its fifty cavernous mouths, Tityos's eternal punishment, what detail has been omitted? A hundred tongues and a voice of iron would not adequately represent the hideousness of Tartarus.

Aside from the consideration of the descriptive powers of the poet, it is evident that the religious motive is operating here. Tartarus must appear thus terrible as a horrible warning to wrong-doers on earth. It is not the purpose of this discussion to explain the close connection, as it appeared to Vergil, between sin and death. The association of the two produced the sentiment under which his description of the Inferno is developed. It is an excellent illustration of the subjective mode of description. His gentle soul, although spellbound by the mystery of death, shrank from its ugliness. Incidentally, the religious and the rhetorical purposes are served. Æneas measures up to the standard of a hero because he braves such dangers as those of Hades. The setting is prepared from which Anchises may show the souls of the unborn heroes of Roman history. But aside from these objects, the complete absorption of the poet in the description of Hades makes it a first consideration. The intensity of his interest in this aspect is sufficient guarantee of its essential originality, and despite the inconsistencies of other phases of the book, toward which we may well believe he was quite indifferent, a very real consistency of another sort is produced.

Death, the great unknown, the doubtful doom of all mankind, cast its shadow upon him. For Horace, this shadow served to hasten the participation of the joys of the present hour. In anticipation of that night of death one must drink life to the lees, and so much as you have given to the joy of your own soul is saved from utter oblivion. Vergil's temperament was of another sort. He must brood and reflect over the lot of the dead. Poverty and relentless toil on earth were preferable to the joyless existence of Hades. Such was probably his real belief. But

there is an important qualification, perhaps, one might say, inconsistency even here. Out of the general gloom of the nether world, one spot serene is found. Here are the happy abodes, the lovely groves, the homes of the blessed. Here a more expansive air with its purple glow embraces the fields. The inhabitants have their own sun and their own stars, they delight themselves with games and song. Instead of the foul smells of Hades, there is the fragrance of the laurel. Instead of death-dealing Bellum is the reign of peace. Instead of the raging river of fire there is the beautiful Eridanus. Instead of darkness we see the purple light, the snowy fillet, and the gleaming fields.

In this sixth book, Hades dominates the poet's thought. Sharing the general depression of his times he has given a description which is in harmony with the well-nigh universal pessimism. But the significant point is that the poet's mind has caught a vision of hope for mankind, a place where virtue is rewarded, where pure pleasures reign. And if the happiness of Elysium is not quite complete, if even here there are tears and unsatisfied love and sad forebodings, yet his Elysian fields, like the golden branch in the dark and boundless forest, are a revelation of hope for the future. Without pressing the allegory too far, the description of the Inferno may represent the development of Vergil's thought from despair to hope, and the progress of mankind from darkness to light.

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